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ABSTRACT

In this paper the author describes the structure, operations, and problems of a year-long, full time, experimental, environmental awareness program at the University of Montana. The program was designed so that students and faculty would work together in a loosely structured, integrated learning experience, with the usual authority structures absent and all persons participating in decision making. The program contained no exams, no papers, no regular classes, and no teacher authority figures to define expectations and educational attainment. After two years the program failed due to questions over authority, self-government, individualism, and collective purpose of the program. By way of conclusion the author suggests that the implications of the anti-authoritarian structure should have been worked out explicitly before the program began because the anti-authoritarian attitudes within the program precluded intellectual work and effective discussion of the differences between legitimate authority and illegitimate authority. Further, without a sense of program legitimacy, it was impossible to transcend the attitudes which engendered hostility toward organization, defined structure, leadership, self-discipline, and intellectual work. (Author/DE)

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THE ROUND RIVER EXPERIMENT:

LEARNING, COMMUNITY, AND THE ABSENCE OF AUTHORITY

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THE ROUND RIVER EXPERIMENT: LEARNING, COMMUNITY, AND THE ABSENCE OF AUTHORITY

In October 1970 a group of ten faculty members from as many departments met to discuss the global environmental crisis as it related to education at the University of Montana. The discussion turned into planning sessions, and these in turn resulted in an unusual program called the Round River Experiment. At one level, the "experiment" originally was intended to demonstrate the superiority of an educational methodology which reversed the normal structures and processes of undergraduate education. At another level, we hoped to demonstrate the superiority for environmental awareness of an integrated, year-long full-time program over ecology courses. We assumed non-authoritarianism as a matter of course, and it was not explicitly "the experiment"; but at the end of two years it was clear that authority questions had been central to the program's success and failure. This paper is a discussion of some of those questions based on my full time participation for 5 of the 6 quarters and on my participation in the planning year.

Originally, I saw the first two years of Round River as different; I saw the first year as successful because of the absence of authority, and the second year as a failure because of the presence of authority. I described the program from this point of view in the following terms:

> "At the end of the first year, many students felt there should be more structure, more teaching by "authorities", more disciplined work expectations. For many, the initial experience of self-discipline and self-motivation "to learn" was difficult, frightening, and guilt-ridden. At the same time, many individuals said it had been the best year of their lives. For most

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I am grateful to Ron Erickson, Roger Dunsmore and Pog Jones for their assistance on earlier drafts; the present draft is my own responsibility.

> it was the first time in an educational environment where no one told them what to do, and the first time in which they were free to define their own knowledge-interests. And for most, it was the most intense sustained feeling of community ever experienced. There was much positive identification with the identity, style, and integrity of the program as an educational experience in which all participants related intimately, personally and openly with one another. Further, each individual learned more about him/herself as a person. Finally, the faculty learned that the process of education as community-making and self-knowing is more important than and prior to the content of education. We also learned that politics and education are the same.
>
> In the second year of the program's life, authority questions dominated the program and defined the experience for everyone. Political questions involving the program's survival, purposes, direction and style were at the center of almost everything. The form authority took was that of rational self-government, and the perceived requirements of fully democratic authority. The faculty was ousted from assigned membership in the small groups, students seized power, in effect, and decided to run their own groups, define their own collective interests, manage the office, steer the program, arrange travel, etc. The program lost its center, and the atmosphere in general meetings and in our building became oppressive. Once the question of program-identity and style surfaced as the main question, individuals began to assume roles, and suspicion, doubt, mistrust tended to separate individuals from the program as community into small ideologically defined groups. At the end of the year, it was clear that the attempt to make the program more self-critically political produces less community, more concern with the subjective self, and less joy in learning. In conclusion one is reminded that Aristotle and A.S. Neill are both right: Aristotle said young persons lack enough experience to do politics well. Neill said that community and freedom are preconditions for education."

I liked this description. It had the right sound to it, it reflected my biased and rather romantic view of The Round River Experiment in a literate and vigorous manner.

But the difficulty with my description is that it masks the reality of those two years. Authority questions were central to the whole program. If the first year was a success because of the absence of authority, it was also a failure because of its anti-authoritarianism, and if in the second year Round River failed <u>as a program</u> because of the presence of authority, it also failed because of its anti-authoritarianism. Clearly, my description

of the first two years only implies definition. In the process of trying to make my meanings clear and accurately reflective of the two years in question, I have had to abandon my original idea.

My task here is simply to explore the implications of the program's anti-authoritarianism as they worked themselves out over a two year period. By way of a conclusion, I will suggest that (1) the implications should have been worked out explicitly before we began the program because (2) the anti-authoritarianism attitudes within the program precluded intellectual work and precluded any effective discussion of differences between legitimate authority and illegitimate authority. (3) Without a sense of one's own legitimacy, it was impossible for us to be self-authorizing the second year. If the logic of Round River was self-government, than our authority principle needed to be explicit; without a clear sense of <u>what</u> we were collectively authorizing, we could not transcend the easy and uncritical anti-authoritarian attitudes which engendered hostility toward organization, defined structure, leadership, self-discipline, and intellectural work.

I try to validate these conclusions with an analysis of the process of Round River. This begins after a description of the program's original philosophy and design.

I

The Round River program was originated as a response to two needs. First, the university had no undergraduate program in environmental education, and very few courses open to freshmen in particular. In 1970 there was an explosion of new "environmental" or "ecology" courses in many departments. The Round River planning group felt these were necessary changes in the curriculum, but not sufficient. The graduate program, for one thing, reached few people in the university, and its emphasis was on training problem-solving activists. The 70 proposed new courses, for another, were spread

out all over the campus in departments and schools, unrelated by any centralizing concept or methodology, and they represented at best a conventional response to an unprecedented global situation. The Round River planning group felt strongly that freshmen (in particular) should have the alternative of a "trans-disciplinary" program in environmental studies, full-time and year-long.

No one in the planning group had any expertise in environmental education programs as such, and we had no specific ideas at the beginning about the content appropriate to such an education. But we all shared the belief that the survival of the biosphere itself, and of the human species, was the central question, and that the university should be addressing itself to that quite explicitly in the context of a highly integrated program, not just in courses. We came to think of Round River as an attempt to become profoundly educated about the prospects for long-term biotic survival. We assumed from the beginning that the prospects do not depend so much on problem-solving (making repairs in a "temporarily faulty technology") as they do on understanding the relationships between human values and environmental problems--and, on changing values where necessary.

Our underlying assumption was that human value systems lie at the root of human problems, and that in particular Western man's values of progress, competition, unlimited consumption and domination over everything are the final causes of the global environmental crisis. For example, we wondered how man can relate at all to the natural environment when he is sensitized to an artificial world, protected from nature by automobiles and cities, planned obsolescence and plastic? How, for that matter, can Western man relate to anything at all, given educational systems which invalidate personal experience and mold people to fit social slots, or living and working situations which make escapism a national religion, or pollution economic which make it painful and costly for humans <u>as humans</u> to exercise their five senses? Value

systems separate men from nature and from other men (and women), and the objective conditions of Western life prevent him from overcoming those separations in so far as they alienate man from himself. Our assumption was debatable, of course, but for us it raised the thematic question for the whole program: what is the proper relationship between man and his environment, both human and biotic?

In our early discussions, environmental education came to mean the development of relationships between man and nature, man and man (community, state), and, man and self. Education meant not just intellectual understanding, but also aesthetic, experiential, emotional, intuitive, and collective understanding. It meant trying to come to know things in many different ways, not by segmenting man into the chemical, the historical, the religious, the economic, or into university student but by whole persons seeking to relate each thing to every other. Education meant integration and synthesis rather than separation and analysis.

The methodological imperative was that Round River be holistic. By holistic, we did not mean to pool and coordinate existing knowledge as it is divided up in academic departments, then teach it. That might be the ideal meaning of "interdisciplinary", but it is not what we meant by holistic. Rather, the point of the holistic approach was to see what could be learned when all participants are students (faculty included), when no specific boundaries are placed around the "subject matter," and when no single question or phenomenon is considered to be irrelevant, or beyond the legitimate confines of our inquiries. We would attempt to work with the program's thematic question without regard to distinctions between academic disciplines.

The approach was experimental, to be sure. None of the faculty planning the program knew precisely how to implement it, or whether it would "work."

The content was therefore general, and it was difficult to predict the impact of such an approach on persons whose educational backgrounds had been the exact opposite of integration and synthesis. But given our assumptions, the holistic approach had to be attempted. The global environment, broadly defined, was to be looked at and experienced in the round, rather than by detached and narrow observation. Once we had the philosophy and the methodology clear enough to gain administrative support, we changed our name from a descriptive "Experiment in Environmental Education" to a metaphor used by Aldo Leopold in an essay called "Round River." We thought the metaphor stated our holistic philosophy quite well; and we even thought (at the end of the planning year) that the content of the program would follow, rather literally, Leopold's expansive biological emphasis:

> In our education system, the biotic continuum is seldom pictured to us as a stream. . .The current is the stream of energy which flows out of the soil into plants, thence into animals, thence back into the soil in a never ending circuit of life. . .To learn the hydrology of the biotic stream we must think at right angles to evolution and examine the collective behavior of biotic materials. This calls for a reversal of specialization; instead of learning more and more about less and less, we must learn more and more about the whole biotic landscape.[1]

It also became clear in our planning sessions that the holistic approach went beyond content into the structure, process, and authority principle of the program. The second major problem to which Round River responded was the fragmentary character of the learning and living experiences of students and faculty (us, anyhow) at the conventionally run university. Rather than perpetuate the intellectual and psychic chaos of a student's normal academic year--eighteen courses in thirty weeks, many books, frequent examinations and papers, large classes, no informal relationships with faculty, few with classmates, living arrangements unrelated to school, and vice-versa, "learning"

[1]Aldo Leopold A Sand County Almanac and Essays on Conservation from Round River, (New York, Ballantine, 1966). pp. 188-189.

confined to classrooms and sanctioned education confined to the physical university--Round River should end that chaos by attempting to integrate the experiences of living and learning. Thus, our structure and procedures reversed those considered to be normal. Students would commit themselves to the program for an academic year, earning forty-eight credits on a pass/no pass basis. There would be no examinations, no papers, and thus no means of asserting the traditional academic authoritarianism of rewards and punishments via coercive grading and judging of students on the basis of their conformist attitudes. The book list would be broadly electic and modest, and related to the year's thematic question in diverse ways. All participants, faculty as well as students, would be fulltime, involved in no other "jobs" or formally enrolled in no courses outside the program. Faculty-student distinctions would be minimized, and eventually "abolished;" we expected the absence of rigid structure, the lack of coercive authority, and the generally diffuse character of the academic content to preclude the formation of authority roles: we anticipated an egalitarian learning community. We expected students to be teachers and teachers to be students. Freshmen would be housed in the same dorm together, as the Round River program, segregated by sex. Meetings would take place in the dorm and in homes off campus, as well as in classrooms in our own building. The program would work in the city and in wilderness areas, as well as on campus. Education thus was to be a full-time process in time, space, and in the company of others.

We expected no particular "product" at the end of the year; no one would be "better prepared" for a job - but we felt confident that a sense of community would develop among people spending a year together under a common roof, sharing experiences, ideas, work, and lives, and we were sure most students would back away from any prechosen conceptions about their major at the end of the year.

Ideally, each student would acquire a sense of autonomy, efficacy, and perhaps a "methodology" or conceptual tool-kit for use anywhere. We implicitly valued the idea of the effective, eclectic generalist energetically rushing off to do battle on behalf of a better world.

II

I want now to shift the discussion to the question of cohesion. In the absence of normal means of coercing standardized performance, what was to hold 100 self-selected, unpredictably diverse students and faculty together for a quarter, let alone a year? We thought that the structure and process of the program would occasion the sense of community we vaguely understood, and that cohesion would evolve, organically and naturally.

First, we planned that the entire program meet weekly, perhaps twice, to hear lectures, discussions, see films and so on, and that these would set the particular theme of the week, keyed to the reading list. These General Meetings would also provide space for business matters and announcements about goings on in the city and on the campus of interest to the program. Second, the program would be divided into subgroups, each with one faculty and 20 students; these subgroups would be viable for an entire quarter. We thought of them as necessary for purposes of seminar discussions, backpacking, work, and as basic social units. Finally, within each subgroup, each student would have a one-to-one hour long conference with that group's faculty persons, four or five times per quarter. The focus of the conferences would be the students journal, or reflective notebook. In all of these groupings, the faculty sought to be no more than equal with the students. This was particularly important for the journals and one-to-one conferences, since we expected not much could happen there without a good deal of mutual trust (the faculty was to keep journals too, and share these with each student). During much of the first year the faculty assumed responsibility for the General Meetings, since we had a sense of the order in which we wanted to read the books and discuss them,

and we needed to plan ahead in order to invite outside faculty to speak or order films, or prepare for the discussion.

The last idea we had about process was the most important. We thought it important to get away from the campus as soon as possible at the beginning of the program year. The most logical place to go was to the university's biological station 100 miles away on Flathead Lake (the largest natural lake west of the Great Lakes). Located on a thin peninsula, the Yellow Bay Biological Station had cabins, a mess hall, laboratories, library, and meeting rooms. Its remoteness from the city, the purity of the natural environment, and the intensity of personal contact within the program made Yellow Bay very attractive to us. In addition, Yellow Bay was a few steps away from backpacking areas and it afforded easy access to different sorts of field studies, such as a marsh at the end of the lake, a ridge top forest which was clear cut the week before we began, a cedar bog, hot springs, a hydroelectric plant, a polluting aluminum plant, and Glacier National Park. Both years, then, Round River began at Yellow Bay only one day after the first General Meeting on campus. Instant isolation, instant intensity, and immense success in initiating a strong sense of community. Imagine, if you will, a peripatetic band of young people, and older people equally, moving about in a kitchen, planning and cooking the day's meals for one hundred people or attending hearings on wilderness proposals, or pollution standards, or back-packing in Rocky Mountain wilderness, or quietly observing the small life in a pond (sometimes beavers or muskrats), the symbiotic cyclings of golden eagles and spawning salmon in Glacier--imagine this peripatetic band talking, laughing, hearing, sharing information, observations, discussing, joking, reading poetry aloud--imagine these things for three weeks, and you perhaps understand the learning community called Round River. People together, everywhere, discovering, becoming. The Yellow Bay beginning worked very well both years.

We also thought that the book list would help the program cohere, for

we picked books which were interesting; despite the diversity in subject matter, almost all the books were first-person experiential accounts of some dimension of the natural or human world, broadly seen rather than narrowly. Important examples from the fall quarter are Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac and Essays on Conservation from Round River; Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau; Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks; Herrigel, Zen and the Art of Archery; Mowat, People of the Deer; Laing, The Politics of Experience; the Last Edition of the Whole Earth Catalogue, and poetry by Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, and others. We avoided "textbooks" with the exception of a formal introductory ecology text, for their detachment, jargon, and general dullness. As it turned out the books were much more important to individuals than as cohesive mechanisms for the program. Discussions and intellectual work, as I shall suggest later, were generally quite frustrating.

Within the structure outlined above, the program experienced similar rythms both years. Autumn quarters were the best, primarily because of the Yellow Bay retreat and wilderness backpacking experiences described earlier. Winter quarter was a disaster. In the first spring quarter, the program partially recovered; in the second, it did not.

In the autumn, the first weeks back at the university after the retreat were a let-down. The intense experience of community was impossible to sustain. being on campus and in town. Further, individuals had to cope for the first time in their lives with no one telling them what to do or what not to do, and most of them found self-motivation and self-discipline extremely difficult. The few who had a sense of their own knowledge-interests functioned well by reading, visiting classes, exploring the university and the city, but most of the students, floundered. Subgroup activities worked eventually to pull individuals out of their depressions, and General Meetings worked too, for a while. Levels of subgroup activity were high, with much energy devoted to plans for getting off campus and back into the woods. In both Novembers, all groups spent a week

at the Forestry School camp out of town, again in cabins and again cooking and living together. Off campus and in the woods was always better, it seemed.

The winter quarter both years was a poor experience, partly because the Missoula sky is very gray, dull, and low most of the time, and it is often depressing. People tended to hibernate, focus on themselves, and they put little effort into meetings. Also, there was no experience at the beginning comparable to Yellow Bay to bring people together as a program. The subgroups were newly re-arranged (a faculty decision)and half the faculty was new. Near the end of the first winter quarter, Round River did spend ten days in Yellowstone National Park on cross-country skis or snowshoes, housed and lectured to by park officials, but we were not invited back the second winter. General Meetings in the winter tended to focus exclusively on questions about the program's identity, purpose, procedures, and worthiness; substantive discussions were infrequent.

In the spring quarter, subgroups were defined and organized according to interests, such as wilderness study, communal living "on the land," biology in the field, photography, making a videotape documentary of the city's riverfront, expeditions to industrial plants around the state, and so on. Some of these subgroups completed their projects, others barely got off the ground.

At the end of both years, most students and faculty returned to Yellow Bay for several days, to enjoy the spring weather, be together for the last time, evaluate the program, and suggest changes for the next year. The first return to Yellow Bay was remarkable for the good feelings which permeated the place; it was as if everyone felt related by the common experience of a year together successfully completed, no matter how difficult at times. There was a very positive sense of joy spread all around. Around 60 students wrote open-ended evaluations of their year in the Round River Experiment, offering

criticisms and suggestions, and many volunteered (both in writing and in person) that it had been the best year of their lives. The second return to Yellow Bay was marked by considerable antagonism, hostility, suspicion, fear, and relief that it was over. Only 6 people offered written evaluations, and I heard no one say it had been the best year of their life. If the program was a qualified success the first year, it was a qualified failure as a program the second year. In one case Round River held together, in the other, it came apart. Cohesion (or the lack of it) was not directly a function of the structure or the process per se. Rather, it was a function of accident, or of factors over which no one had any particular control. This may be seen by examining the program more closely in terms of the authority questions which were buried in its center-buried because unexamined.

III

In evaluations written by students at the end of the first year, perhaps a third wished there had been more structure, clearer goals, more teaching by "authorities," and more disciplined work expectations. People expressed privately something that had become difficult to express publicly because of the intolerence that existed in Round River for anything that sounded like authority. The major authority questions involved our anti-authoritarianism. What was its nature, its justification, and its limits-if any? These questions were never entertained: it was as if questioning our anti-authoritarianism was an authoritarian act, insofar as it implied restrictions on everyone's sense of freedom.

People came to feel that freedom meant the absence of authority. Indeed, they came to feel that way because the faculty during the first quarter indicated that Round River was the students program: you are free to make it work on your

own, we said, no one is going to tell you what to do, "you decide what you are interested in learning and doing, and we'll help you get started." And the program's structure certainly re-inforced the notion that people were free (from the percieved authoritarianism of "school"); no exams, no papers, no regular classes, no "authorities" defining the world for you. There were no demands made on anyone, beyond the expectation that students would stay with and participate in the program; no pressure to perform in any way, beyond keeping a journal and having a few conferences. It all became a simple formula: no pressure=no authority=freedom.

The decision-making process the first year was fairly democratic, to the degree that it worked. The faculty had worked out a book list before the year began, and added books suggested by students during the year. The faculty arranged the substantive content of the general meetings according to the reading list, but these meetings became an occasion for numerous announcements and sharing of news as well. Discussion about the activities, location and focus of the program were substantially democratic, made in General Meetings. Round River encouraged a lot of talk but it offered no mechanism for resolving disputes, beyond appeals to the vaguely defined purpose of the program. The collective focus of the program was unclear because it shifted as individuals or groups argued their preferences. The decision-making process did not always work, and Round River was often hard pressed to function as a educational program or as a learning community. Still, people continued to feel free.

These two factors-the absence of authority in the form of pressure or demands, and the democratic character of the programs focus-seemed instrumental in allowing a sense of community to develop. People by the end of the year were very easy and relaxed around one another; friendships were close and multiple; egalitarian feelings seemed genuine, as people were not judgmental of each other, but accepting; and there was a distinct sense of membership in

a particular and unique educational program. Many spoke of having internalized Round River as a way of being in the world in terms of life style and educational philosophy. Most of us had spent 9 months in the same educational environment, had come to know each other outside the context of roles, and had experienced personal change and growth as a result. It seemed clear that some dimensions of our anti-authoritarianism had very positive consequences.

Indeed, the anti-authoritarianism described so far because Round River's legitimizing principle, and therefore, its authority principle. Round River was a self-defining and self-moving program within the general context of a program statement and philosophy which were frequently, sometimes exclusively discussed during the entire year. It was also a program within a university, and we often measured our actions by the degree to which they were different from the university. In an important sense, these discussions were a steering mechanism for the program, since plans were continually evaluated in General Meetings and in subgroups, according to people's sense of what the program was supposed to be about in terms of goals, content, procedures, and resemblence to the university. Very little was done in Round River except by consent, based on a shared perception of our identity as a particularly defined community of learners. Round River became self-authorized. Almost all participants became convinced that the program was the <u>right</u> educational process, that it <u>was</u> a genuine and welcome alternative to traditional authoritarianism in education and that it <u>ought</u> to work. Round River thus was held together by a widely shared belief in the program itself as a positive experience and as an alternative. That widely shared belief amounts to moral authority, or a sense of our own legitimacy. And what is authority properly defined, if not a claim to legitimacy? The easiest authority to accept is one's own.

But the implications of this were never made clear. No one ever tried

to distinguish between legitimate authority and illegitimate authority. We did not recognize that the program's strength lay in its sense of its own legitimizing and self authorizing character. Consequently, we did not recognize that the program's weakness lay in its limitless anti-authoritarianism. In intellectual matters this meant that program was paralyzed by its rejection of anything that resembled the "straight" university-including faculty efforts to "teach".

To be sure, the faculty was ill-prepared to be intellectual authorities since almost all the books were beyond our particular area of competence. But those of the faculty who wished to insist on remaining as teachers, claiming a legitimate authority, based on competence as readers, interpreters, analysts, and so on, could not do so, since the logic of the program seemed to the students to be that "there is no such thing as selective non-authoritarianism; if the authoritarianism of 'school' is removed, then so is the authoritarianism of teachers--and never mind their claims of legitimacy." If some authority is bad, then all authority is. Consequently, anything which was thought to resemble the "straight" university was rejected as an arbitrary and authoritarian impediment to the learning process and community which people believed in--both students and faculty. By winter quarter the theme song of anti-authoritarianism was clear: anything reminiscent of the "normal" educational system was thunderingly labeled as "bullshit." There was a certain charm about that sort of esprit de corps for awhile, but it got tiresome when it began to serve as an analysis of the merits of any proposal, and it was intellectually paralyzing when applied to any abstraction used by the faculty to talk about ideas. The collective intellectual life of Round River was not only the program's least successful part, but the intellectual atmosphere was oppressive. Students in their evaluations claimed to have read most of the books in the program, but there was no way to

assess that claim by the seminar experiences which were mostly a dismissal of ideas, rather than a consideration of them. The cry of "bullshit" amounted to intimidation by the most vocal students, and it amounted to authoritarian arbitrariness.

It is likely that the underlying cause of all this was the faculty's premise that one can simply reverse the normal structures and processes of undergraduate education. Although the Round River philosophy had positive goals, the reversal premise was merely negative, and it became the ethos of the program, the first year. We assumed non-authoritarianism, but we did not think it through in advance.

IV

The second year of Round River got off to an excellent start. After 5 weeks the new program seemed way ahead of the first year in the rate at which community was developing; discussions in subgroups were exciting, intellectually promising and thoughtful. The program consisted of 80 new students, four faculty (only one new to the program), and four student assistants back from the first year to help provide continuity and to validate by their presence the claim that the program did work, and that community was its magic. By the end of the year, however, the program consisted of individuals and small, sharply defined groups who eyed each other with suspicion, hostility, and some fear. Round River had no "center"; there was no longer a shared sense of what the program was, no sense of committment to its method, its distinctness, its educational potential. There was no collective energy, no spirit, no community, and often only bare civility.

The second year became consumed by politics: questions about our procedures of self-government filled the air, including group criticism of nonconformist individualist tendencies. It was the politics of self-criticism, which in this context means each person and each subgroup had to justify any

choices made by individuals which detracted from the collective integrity of the next higher whole: subgroup for individual defectors, whole program for subgroup defectors, and the "rest of the world" for the whole program. The values urged on Round River said that for a community to be socially and morally responsible, it needed to understand and justify its position with respect to the wider political, economic, and social world, and to take a clear and consistent stand against irrational and un-democratic institutions and procedures, capitalism, and competitive, anti-social, inegalitarian values. Individuals were expected to demonstrate by their actions whether they agreed with these values, and they could expect criticism if they didn't-criticism usually in the form of demands that they justify themselves. What are your politics (oppressor or egalitarian or selfish-individualism)? What are your values (exploiter or champion of social justice; capitalist or socialist)? Useful questions, but when people confronted with such questions have not previously thought through their answers, their reaction tends toward immobility and paralysis, much like the centipede who stopped walking forever when asked to explain how he managed to co-ordinate all those legs? There are many intellectual and abstract connections that need to be made in order to answer such questions, and if those connections are already put together in a tight ideological package, then those who have difficulty understanding or accepting that package all at once find it hard to commit themselves to action on behalf of its principles. Persons of this sort (a majority of the Round River students) then have the choice of staying away or putting their energy into a confrontational, self-critical atmosphere which is perceived as authoritarian and to a degree, painful. Many students tried the second choice for half the year. This accounts for the hostility and suspicion at the end. Most later made the first choice; this accounts for the fragmentation of the program.

Political questions came into the program in late October of the second year, in the form of critical analysis of the values exemplified by Round

River, as seen by four persons from outside the program who shared in a socialist (including dialectical) view of the world. The program was attacked for its "back to the land" escapist, do-it-yourself middle class, conservative and reactionary (because individualist) values. Students were accused of being indulgent (trying to feel good), lazy (have a vacation, not work, not study, exert no self-discipline), and uncritical (no examination of their own values, and of the "contradictions" in their lives). The faculty was attacked for teaching books which had nothing to do with the world political situation, and for not developing a critical, historical consciousness. The faculty was also criticized for elitist decision-making processes, including "arbitrary choices" about books, meeting times, and the thematic content of the program. Finally, the faculty was acused of being the uncritical centipede: we had not made clear to each other or to the program what our politics were, and wer therefore couldn't know how our politics affected the program. We were reminded that young Germans in the early 1930's combined a very strong anti-intellectual sentiment with nature-loving romanticism, and ended up by dropping out of the political world.

The legitimizing principle of the program became guilt; instead of a belief in the rightness of the program, Round River began to believe in its wrongness. A sense of guilt over the wrongness of the program channeled and defined individual and group energy for the rest of the quarter. General Meetings no longer entertained lecturers or considered intellectual matters. They became Town Meetings, and their object was to be articulate about our community ethic and to learn how to talk about our politics as individuals and as a program. For example, what kinds of projects were each of the subgroups involved in, what was the nature of the collective energy of each group, what was each individuals' sense of commitment to the subgroup and what was the subgroup sense of commitment to the whole program?

It was tacitly agreed that each group should involve itself in defining and engaging itself in some socially/politically/educationally useful activity, like researching and writing a local history of subdivision practices and land use policy, or undertake by observation and involvement a critical review of a public school system, or do guerrilla theater as a means of calling attention to world political situations, or engage in confrontation politics with authorities outside the program (e.g. university administration about its support of Round River, local industry about its pollution practices). And, each group did involve itself in attempts to define such projects, and they tried to organize and mobilize themselves to act. In a few notable cases, projects were undertaken and completed; some students did spend two weeks working in a public school system in a nearby town, and a visit to the university by Nelson Rockefeller did occasion both guerrilla theater (Attica theme) and confrontation politics (interruption of a "fat cat" lunch by demands that Rockefeller defend his politics).

For the most part, however, the subgroups could not organize and mobilize, given the conflict between the individualist and collectivist perspectives which dominated discussions about how to organize. The arguments centered on the question of whether things should happen spontaneously, or as a result of planning and commitment. These arguments were not usually resolved. Most people were in agreement with the (contradictory) principles that each group and the program should be completely self governing. A good deal of time was spent in Town Meetings trying to resolve conflicts between those who favored group separatism and those who favored program unity and self-government. These arguments were resolved, in two major cases, with important consequences.

In the first case, one group had decided on its own to spend the period from Thanksgiving to Christmas vacation at a biological station on the Oregon coast. When this was announced in a Town Meeting, there was a strongly

negative reaction. By what right did a whole group think it could unilaterally decide to leave the program and go "do its own thing?" Was this not the same problem that each subgroup faced with individuals who wandered away on their own without consulting members of the subgroup, without informing them, without even caring? Was Round River a program? Were we trying to develop a community ethic, a collective sensability, or were we irretrievably lost to the American ethic of isolated individualism?

This question proved divisive for several weeks, until one faculty member argued vigorously with the Oregon group that they should at least submit their plan to the whole program for discussion. The Oregon group declined the suggestion but finally cancelled their plans. The divisiveness of the whole issue opened permanent fissures in the program and while the Oregon trip was shelved, the issue of separatism remained a permanent issue in the program at all levels.

The second case involved the question of self-government, and it centered on the presence of faculty members in each of the subgroups. Only two of the fall faculty members were scheduled to stay with the program in the winter quarter, and two new persons were to join the staff. Questions arose in each of the subgroups and in Town Meetings about the distribution of the old and new faculty, and about the composition and character of the groups. One faction argued that groups should form around the particular academic talents of the faculty members, this faction consisted of the ten or fifteen politically oriented persons who wanted to be with an incoming Marxist faculty member. This was of course ironic, since it meant a return to the authority of specialists. Another faction argued that diversity of interests in the subgroups maintained the character of the program's holistic method. Some wanted the groups to define themselves, then invite particular faculty perons to join them; others, feeling very much like assuming full responsibilitv for self-government,

decided that they did not want any faculty at all. Toward the end of the quarter, in a long and grueling night session, each of the four groups interviewed each of the four prospective faculty members for the winter quarter. It was rather like being examined for one's virtue. At the end of the interviews, the subgroups met as a whole and decided that they wanted no faculty in any of their groups. Instead, the faculty was to serve as resource persons, on call for whichever group wanted their particular expertise. The program was to be run entirely by the students: book discussions, office business, travel arrangements, lectures, administrative matters, everything. The expectation was that the program would be fully democratic (with the faculty as somewhat less than equal) and completely self-governing. The faculty, symbols of authority, were no longer necessary.

Once ousted, the four faculty members agreed that there was a good chance students might in fact be able to run the program, and--we told ourselves--run it better than we had. In general, the students also seemed pleased with the prospects. There was more unity evident amongst them, more feelings of community, than had been observable since the beginning of the year. The books for the winter quarter had been chosen earlier by the students through a remarkable democratic process and the emphasis was highly political; some of the subjects were racial injustice and black politics (Angela Davis, Bobby Seale, George Jackson); woman's politics; American interventions in revolutions around the world; a compendious discussion of life in China; anarchism; among others. The book list was very ambitious. The overall theme of the books and the program had become self-government, and this theme was clearly articulated and rationalized. Despite traces of skepticism, the faculty felt very good about these developments. After all, they seemed to be entailed by the non-authoritarian logic of the program and they were positive steps rather than simply negative reactions.

The new regime began in early January. Students returned from somewhat extended Christmas vactions with anxiety, enthusiasm, or guardedness. One of

the questions raised in the first Town Meeting concerned the order in which the books were to be read, and whether they were to be read in the same sequence in the whole program or in different sequences in each of the subgroups. It was decided that each group could read anything in any order it chose. The faculty retired its offices, unclear as to how we were supposed to prepare four different books at the same time, just in case we got called on. And, we posted schedules outside our doors in order that students could sign up for individual conferences, should they want to. We were perhaps available some 15 to 20 hours per week--at the beginning of the quarter. Three faculty members, three groups, and approximately 70 students.

The small groups were energetic, for two or three weeks. They met often, at different times, in different places. They discussed books (often awkwardly--no one had had much experience, after all, at leading discussion groups or involving themselves in a sustained discussion of an entire book), files were organized in the office, work schedules were established, charts were drawn concerning group activities and announcements were posted all over the walls concerning things individuals were interested in. But the Town Meetings were a different matter. The bias against order, direction, organization and planning was overwhelming. There was no continuity between meetings, little preparation for them, and no leadership. The activists behind the firing of the faculty were particularly silent, except perhaps to occasionally censorially criticize someone else's idea. It was as if the removal of the faculty from groups was sufficient to allow self-government to occur "spontaneously." No one wanted to be "authoritarian." The constant theme of Town Meetings was the conflict between freedom and authority; its lyric was spontaneity vs. planning, collective vs. individual. There seemed to be no way of resolving the conflict, and all it produced was hostility.

By way of suggesting a structure that might make the Town Meetings

matters of public (program) concern and interest, one faculty member suggested that representatives from subgroups inform the whole community of activities within the group; its projects, ideas generated by book discussions, appeals for support, plans for social events, dinners, etc.; in short, a general sharing of positive energy. It was further suggested that each group delegate spokesmen and that on a rotating basis, each group contribute a program chairman to establish an agenda from each of the groups, and to provide some direction at the Town Meetings. And, it was suggested that everyone come to Town Meetings prepared. These suggestions were acted upon for two weeks, but participation in the Town Meetings diminished as the experience of them grew more frustrating. Self-government has never been easy, especially without a generally shared prior sense of community, and few individuals were capable of either organization and patience or tolerance for very long. It became difficult to maintain high interest in these meetings, since they lost direction, content, and purpose. As energy drained from the center of the program, subgroups began to meet less frequently, less energetically, and in smaller numbers. Our one attempt with a Round River festival, involving poetry reading, music, slide and tape shows, and sharing of food, failed to restore any sense of community, however momentary. Students began to spend more time away from the program, in small communes or tribes, preoccupied with questions of living together and trying to find something to interest them. A few tried to continue to meet and work with ideas, but such attempts were forlorn. No one seemed able to restore any meaning to the program as a whole, and it quietly disintegrated.

The presence in Round River for three weeks in the spring quarter of the poet, ecologist and Zen scholar Gary Snyder did little to help, particularly because the faculty expected him to somehow "save the program." We had acquiesed in our removal to the edges of the program, and essentially sat on

the sidelines in Town Meetings, like the fall quarter activists, watching quietly to see if the students could in fact run their own program. Our input was minimal, and not particularly persuasive. By the time Snyder arrived in early spring, the disintegration of Round River was fairly complete; many students were focusing entirely on personal politics, trying to live and learn by themselves individually and in small groups, without the threat of staff or aggressive, critical fellow students pressuring them to perform within the program. Snyder was treated more as a curiosity than as an integral part of the program, and while his three weeks were the high point of the year for many of us, the program was beyond repair.

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Despite the conscious shift of the program from environmental concerns to political concerns, the anti-authoritarian attitudes of the students and faculty were never called into question. The faculty abdicated its responsibility, as it had the first year, by acquiesence and passive observation. Worse (perhaps) the activists behind the shift in emphasis also sat back and watched, when the time came for the students to govern the whole program. Individuals tried to get self-government started winter quarter, but each one had little support and no one could sustain much effort in the face of the strong bias toward spontaneity and individualism, and the strong aversion toward organization and collective work. In an evaluation of the program written at the end of the second year, one faculty member concluded that Round River "seemed designed to teach people that self-government was impossible, that one needed external authority (bosses) to get anything done, and that individualism was too basic for community to emerge or survive." Specifically, he argued that the failure to deal with authority questions resulted in fundamental confusions which support "a false dichotomy between individual and community", to wit:

1. Externally imposed discipline is oppressive. Therefore, all discipline, including self-discipline, is suspect.
2. Criticism issuing from authorities over whom you have no control is oppressive. Therefore, all criticism, even comradely or group self-criticism is oppressive.
3. Non-democratic, external authority is oppressive. Therefore, leadership, organization, and democratic group decisions are too.
4. To be free is primarily to be left alone. For the group or community to have expectations of you or to criticize you is for it to threaten your freedom.

His last comment was, "What sort of experiment is this? Who needs it??"

As a program, the Round River Experiment failed to demonstrate either the superiority of its educational methodology or the superiority of a year-long, full-time program over departmentally taught courses. At the individual level, however, Round River seems to have taught a good deal. First year participants experienced more community than most people do in a life time, and developed a sensitive environmental consciousness. Despite the failure of the program to be self-governing, second year participants seem to have a highly developed political consciousness and (I am told) are still working with questions about their own political values. I know of at least 15 who are engaged in two collectives, one a state-wide alternative newspaper, and the other a cooperative food and book store. Faculty participants in the second year have to a considerable extent changed their styles of teaching and their focus on political questions as a direct result of their experience in Round River.

As a program, the Round River Experiment was perhaps too ambitious, on the one hand, and too ill-defined on the other. It is not clear that the program would have been a "success" if authority questions had been explicit, and if we had understood the nature of our anti-authoritarianism. We all lack experience in self-government. The question is, do we want that experience? If we do, then we may as well make it the rule rather than the exception, and find ways of making it central to the educational process at all levels.

Self-government without external authority is a full-time activity, and it is an art which requires time to learn. If we are not learning this in our educational institutions, then what <u>are</u> we learning?